

Glimpses of Brillion

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Editor's note: It is true that Saint Patrick's Day has come and gone, but this wee bit of literature will surely put a smile on your face, no matter the time of year. Enjoy!

It is Saint Patrick's Day as I draft this bit of prose and I can't help but hearken back to my earlier years when I attended a parochial country school. We never, I say again, never, had school on Saint Patrick's Day. The reason for that was because our parish priest was very Irish – Father O'Leary, and for his money, Saint Patrick's Day was at least as much of a holiday as Christmas or New Years. We students took particular delight, because winter was on the wane and spring work had not yet begun, so it was a real free day. We didn't even have to go to church, because it was not a Holy Day of Obligation. We just had one great day to have fun and make the most of life. And then to top it all off, ice was usually breaking up on the river adjacent to our back yard, and one could find a lot of excitement by riding ice cakes downstream. The term "Spring Break" had not yet been coined, but for us country youngsters, the real meaning lay in the break-up of ice on the river, and it was a lot of fun to play Huckleberry Finn for a day and ride rafts of opportunity, with no need for a propulsion system.

One March day that is indelibly etched in memory was near to, but not Saint Patrick's Day. It was a regular school day and my younger brother and I walked the gravel road on our way to school. Spring break had occurred and most of the ice was well on its way downstream, headed into Green Bay (the water body, not the city). We paralleled the river for about a quarter mile and as we were about to turn north, away from the river, we noted that way upstream there was an ice jam, which accounted for the fact that no ice rafts were currently going downstream. That was a situation that demanded closer investigation, and we quickly concluded that we could go upstream to assess the situation and still get to school on time. As sometimes happens with the younger set, by the time we reached the ice dam we had kind of forgotten all about school, and we thought we could jar loose a large piece of ice and ride it downstream. After crossing over to the wooded side of the river on the ice dam, we set about prying loose a sizable raft, got aboard, and rode it down stream, hoping all the while that when we passed in back of our house our mother would not be looking out the window.

We seemed to have passed unnoticed, and less than a half mile further downstream, when we passed under the railroad bridge, we abandoned the ice raft and made our way back upstream, on the side opposite from our house – the forested side. When we reached the ice dam, we successfully pried loose another large raft and hopped aboard to continue our adventure. Once again we disembarked at the railroad bridge, made our way back upstream, and the adventure continued.

It was a glorious spring day, and we shed our jackets while we ate our lunches. All thoughts of school were long gone. What we were doing was much more fun than school. The afternoon was more than half gone when our prying efforts on the ice dam had an unforeseen effect – the whole ice dam let loose and headed downstream. We were adventurous but not stupid, and we ran alongside the ice flow rather than trying to hop aboard, curious as to what would happen when all that ice hit the piers supporting the railroad bridge. The designers of the bridge must have had ice in mind, because it was pretty much a non- event. The ice simply broke up and went around the piers. And now what? Much too late for school and too early to go home. We would have to cross the river on the railroad bridge because that was the side we lived on, and there was no other bridge around. We dawdled away the afternoon until we saw youngsters walking homeward, and then concluded that it would be safe to go home and pretend we had been in school all day.

We were seated at the supper table when my mother announced what an amazing thing she had seen that day. Her schooling only went as far as the sixth grade and her grammar was not the best, but this is pretty much what came out: "You shoulda seen what I seen today! I seen these two kids riding ice down the river. Then I seen them running through the woods and around the bend. Then a little while later here they come again, riding a piece of ice. They looked like they shoulda been in school, so they were playing hookey. If you kids ever tried something like that I'd beat your a..." My brother and I were both very quiet.